


The need for speed! 10 ways that WhatsApp and instant messaging can enhance communication (and clinical care) in sport and exercise medicine

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Just as the majority of athletes are constantly seeking to get faster and better, sport and exercise medicine (SEM) clinicians need quicker and more efficient strategies to communicate with their athletes and colleagues. This drive for enhanced communication by clinicians is underscored by Ekstrand and colleagues' finding that

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positive internal communication between the medical team and the head coach/manager in elite football reduced injury burden and increased player availability.¹ Return-to-play timings can make or break a team's success in elite sport, and it is natural for clinical teams to push boundaries with regards to their speed of communication.

INEVITABLE, IMPORTANT AND IMMEDIATE

At the elite level of sport, the majority of SEM clinicians will use some form of instant messaging (IM platform) for three main purposes:

1. To discuss player findings with other staff members.
2. To plan treatment sessions.
3. To interact with athletes to reassure/advise them on their status and recovery.

Table 1 outlines examples of these, and other methods by which the modern clinician can use IM platforms to enhance their communication strategies.

THE FUTURE IS ALREADY HERE

The initial shift toward virtual communications began with the introduction of 'telemedicine', which provided clinicians in all forms of medicine with innovative platforms to communicate with their patients and colleagues.² The emergence of the smartphone then allowed even easier access to IM platforms. WhatsApp is currently the world's popular IM platform with 2 billion users³ and its widespread adoption has led to its integration in many medical settings, including as a simple and efficient communication tool in stroke medicine⁴ and emergency surgery.⁵

BENEFITS OF WHATSAPP

A key factor in the use of WhatsApp by clinicians is the widespread of WhatsApp by Millennials, with 84% of adults aged 24–35 years old in the UK using WhatsApp.⁶ Given that a large proportion of athletes are in this generational group, WhatsApp is clearly a platform that athletes are already comfortable in using. For many clinicians, responses to emails are too slow to share effective and up-to-date information between the medical team, coaches and athletes. WhatsApp provides the ability to communicate with many individuals at once through group chats, allows the

sharing of images/videos/PDFs within the message itself and enables the sender to know when messages have been read by the recipient.

CROSSING ALL THE T'S: HAVE WE?

IM platforms are yet to be perfectly regulated for the medical setting. While WhatsApp provides end-to-end encryption (meaning that messages can only be seen by each of the users), encryption is not effective for group messages.⁷ The widespread sharing of sensitive patient information by doctors through IM platforms without patient consent is of concern,⁸ and medicolegal implications in the use of WhatsApp for clinical interactions have not been fully explored. Bullying seen in other domains of sport may also transcend into interactions through WhatsApp, as outlined by the example in table 1. Practical guidance covering clinical interactions via WhatsApp in SEM is yet to be clearly defined, and the role that WhatsApp group moderators can play in communication via WhatsApp also requires more exploration. Notably, the nuances associated with the use of WhatsApp and other IM platforms for medical communication in elite sport are not fully understood. The nature of the relationships that SEM clinicians have with uninjured athletes in their squads is clearly different to that of a general clinician working with members of the public. As such, the nature of SEM clinician–athlete communication via WhatsApp is also likely to be different, and consideration how to achieve professionalism in this setting is required.

AN EVOLVING REALITY

The current covid-19 pandemic has put an increased spotlight on embracing telehealth approaches across all forms of healthcare, including SEM. WhatsApp may be the platform of choice for many SEM clinicians now, but history has indicated that newer and better platforms are always around the corner. Rather than become wedded to the use of just one specific IM platforms, SEM clinicians should consider how they can best use any new communication platforms which emerges. Adhering to existing best-practice communication recommendations from the respective Professional,

Statutory and Regulatory Bodies, in conjunction with staying abreast of technological advances in the field of communication, will help to future-proof clinicians with these technologies.

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Table 1 Recommendations and practical examples for the use of WhatsApp in SEM

Nature of recommendation	Recommendations for use of WhatsApp in SEM	Practical example
Functional	Embrace functionality WhatsApp allows files, photos and videos to be shared. Could these enhance your communication with athletes and staff?	Physiotherapist in professional cricket: Event: Message received from upset player with setback in ACL rehabilitation. Solution: Short voice note shared with player for reassurance rather than sending a message.
Functional	Recognise limitations Will a phone call or a face-to-face meeting will be more appropriate than an instant message? Verbal and non-verbal communication are the cornerstone of effective medical communication.	Doctor in professional football: Event: Receives MRI scan showing significant abnormality for a player. Solution: Due to understandable anxieties from the player relating to the scan, the Doctor arranges to meet the player in person to discuss the MRI result.
Functional	Educate clearly Using infographics and emojis on WhatsApp can help distribute key messages to athletes, leading to positive and lasting behavioural change.	Physiotherapist in a national sporting organisation: Event: Outbreak of gastroenteritis within the national judo squad. Solution: Shares concise information on hand hygiene strategies with the judo squad via a WhatsApp group message with emojis.
Functional	Communicate rapidly Optimise information sharing by sending group WhatsApp messages regarding changes to session planning and meeting times (rather than emails or individual phone calls).	Video analyst in professional football: Event: Coach brings team meeting forward by 1 hour unexpectedly. Solution: Video analyst messages the staff and players WhatsApp groups about this change to the schedule and prompts everyone to share this message.
Professional	Set boundaries Consider whether to set boundaries with your players and colleagues around when and how you will be accessible through WhatsApp.	Sports Therapist in semi-professional rugby: Event: Change to work–life balance by undertaking additional caring responsibilities for family. Solution: Informs coaches/players that non-emergency messages will be replied to during traditional working hours (09:00–18:00).
Professional	Administer effectively Identify your rationale for using WhatsApp groups, and consider amending the group administrators if this will streamline communication.	Doctor in professional football: Event: Staff/player WhatsApp group used for logistics frequently goes off on irrelevant tangents. Solution: Speaks to the head coach, and group administrators are changed so only staff can post messages.
Professional	Enhance engagement Consider using WhatsApp to overcome geographical restrictions and time constraints to facilitate athlete engagement with rehabilitation and performance.	Physiotherapist in amateur hockey: Event: Limited face-to-face contact with injured athletes consistently led to suboptimal return to play outcomes. Solution: Introduces WhatsApp to discuss rehabilitation programmes, monitor exercise technique and encourage athletes within the squad.
Ethicolegal	Stay legal Abide by your PSRB guidelines at all times to always use WhatsApp in an ethical and professional manner.	Doctor in professional ice hockey: Event: Receives a video from a relative which they find funny but may be considered offensive. Solution: They are aware of their PSRB obligations and therefore does not send it to the other staff members on the medical/coaching staff group.
Ethicolegal	Be kind IM platforms potentially provide a stage to engage in bullying. Take proactive steps to ensure conduct on WhatsApp meets the standards of your organisation’s policy on bullying and communication.	Sport Scientist in professional rugby: Event: Notices a coach repeatedly making disparaging comments about the club physiotherapist (who is also in the WhatsApp group). The physiotherapist is affected by these comments. Solution: Highlights this issue to their line manager, and steps are taken to address the matter and prevent its reoccurrence.
Ethicolegal	Keep documenting While WhatsApp is useful for rapid medical communication, key points should be recorded and saved in the athlete’s medical records to facilitate continuity of care.	Sports Therapist at a semi-professional football club: Event: Exchange of WhatsApp messages with a player regarding their ankle injury. Solution: Updates coaches on the recovery of the athlete and summarises the discussion in the athlete’s medical records.

IM, instant messaging; PSRB, Professional Statutory Regulation Body; SEM, sport and exercise medicine.